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Archaeology and Culture History in the Central Niger Delta

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June 2008 Newsletter

Book Review

Abi Alabo Derefaka. *Archaeology and Culture History in the Central Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Onyoma Research Publications, 2003, 319 pp. \$31.50 (paper), ISBN 978-36122-0-4.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Zacharys Anger Gundu (Ph.D.), Department of Archaeology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria.

This volume sets out in seven chapters to accomplish three major objectives. These are:

(1) deriving a chronology for the Central Niger Delta from the archaeological record; (2) reconstructing past life ways including dispersal and migrations in the Central Delta; and (3) highlighting possible intra and inter community relationships in the general Delta area.

In the first chapter, the author introduces readers to the Niger Delta by providing background information on the history and physical environment of the Delta. The chapter also makes introductory remarks on the linguistic history of the area based on the works of Greenberg (1963 and 1969), Talbot (1926 and 1932), Williamson (1970, 1972, 1982 and 1989) and Hamsford (1976). Professor Alagoa's division of the Delta into Eastern, Central and Western along physiographic, linguistic and ethnic lines is adopted in the book. Initial archaeological work in the Delta is argued to have been done at the instance of Professor Alagoa who had recognized the difficulties and limitations of his use of oral traditions and anthropology to sketch Ijo history from the Central Delta as far back as 4000 B.C. While admitting the contribution of archaeology to the history of man in the Eastern Delta in the areas of adding "concreteness" to historical reconstruction based on oral traditions, chronology and economic prehistory, the

author argues that because of its limited focus, it would be inappropriate to apply findings and chronological data from the archaeological work in the Eastern Delta to other parts of the Delta. Articulating his methodology, the author uses a combination of Ijo oral traditions, ethnographic mapping, reconnaissance surveys and aerial photographs to locate sites in the Central Delta out of which three (Agadagbabou, Koroama and Isomabou) were chosen for more detailed study including survey and excavations.

In chapter two, the reader is treated to what the author calls a “brief history of the Central Delta Ijo.” Though, the author is of the opinion that the first ‘truly historical reconstruction of the Ijo past’ was Professor Alagoa’s account in 1972, he relies on Owonaro’s “amateur reconstruction” (see Owonaro 1949) to sketch a common origin for the Ijo and their occupation of the Niger Delta as a west to east movement. According to Owonaro’s account, Ijo was the grandson of Lamurudu and the first son of Oduduwa. When Ijo was banished from Ile-Ife by Oduduwa and sent to guard the mouth of the river Niger, his father (Oduduwa) instructed him to settle at a place that would be indicated to him by “the presence of cowries spread over the ground.” He was also to acquire a crown with which “to rule that part of the country” from that place. After he left Ile Ife in 990 A.D., Ijo traveled to Benin from where he and his entourage went by river to Lagos and then to the mouth of the Escravos river from where they started spreading over the Delta to found places like Forcados, Burutu and Warri. It was while on Wilberforce Island, Ijo and his entourage found the “cowries” at Agadagbabou where they finally settled, grew and spread to other parts of the Delta.

The author criticizes this story line as too simplistic and argues that the initial human settlement of the Delta was most probably a multi-directional movement of different but linguistically related peoples who had knowledge of how to exploit the aquatic resources of the

Delta. According to him, those with knowledge of mixed economy settled by the fringe zone and freshwater swamp areas while those whose knowledge was limited to fishing alone preferred the mangrove swamps and salt water environments of the Delta.

As a specific historical background, a summary of the history of the various Ijo groups of the Central Delta is given. The Ijo of Kolokuma, Gbaran and Ogbo are featured in this summary including details of their different settlements as well as their wards and quarters.

Chapter three, titled “Archaeological investigations: Reconnaissance and excavations in the Central Delta” opens with the author’s working definition of a site as “a location in which one can find material remains that are evidence of human activity or habitation in the past.” The author identifies, Agadagbabou, Koroama, and Isomabou as the three sites in the Central Delta which he had investigated against the background of five specific hypotheses. These are:

- i. The Central Delta environment was not a hostile environment by the time the early Ijo arrived the area.
- ii. It is possible to reconstruct the broad outlines of the process of the peopling of the Central Delta area using information from archaeological research and other data categories adopted in the study.
- iii. It should be possible to distinguish between the Central Delta Ijo and other (non Ijo) inhabitants of parts of the Central Delta such as the Taylor Creek area.
- iv. From the archaeological record and a combination of the other data categories, it should be possible to trace the pattern of migration out of the Central Niger Delta especially eastwards.
- v. Oral traditions of origin can be a valued guide to the location of archaeological sites in the Central Niger Delta.

After these hypotheses, the author proceeds to give an explicit report format for the three sites and a detailed report of his work on Agadagbabou. According to him, reconnaissance on Agadagbabou (4⁰ 58'N, 6⁰ 12'E) was carried out in March, 1979. Excavations on the site were, however, carried out a year later. All together, four test pits were excavated on the site. Finds

from the site include, 2,518 potsherds, fish bones, smoking pipes and some beads. Chapter three closes with an elaborate discussion of the site stratigraphy and an interpretation of the finds. While arguing that an analysis of the stratigraphy of the site would lead to the construction of chronologies and culture history in the Central Niger Delta, he specifically discusses the stratigraphy of Test Pits II and IV, since according to him, these reflect the depositional history of the site. Test Pit II had four bands of dark grey soil containing a high concentration of charcoal and pottery. Each band has an average thickness of 15cm and is separated by a light or yellowish brown sterile soil. Three distinct layers delineated by color and inclusions characterize Test Pit IV. While the top layer is light brown with few potsherds, the second layer of black silty soil has a large concentration of charcoal, potsherds and burnt clay. The author interprets this as midden deposit. The third layer is “compact yellowish brown sterile subsoil” with no cultural materials.

Of the three radio carbon dates (310 ± 70 , 220 ± 90 , 220 ± 90) obtained for the site, the author suggests an apparent inversion since the oldest of these dates, (310 ± 70) comes from a point nearer the surface than the other two dates. This inversion is explained using the effects of ethnographic refuse disposal practices in extant settlements in the Central Delta where younger and older refuse materials are mixed in the formation of midden deposits.

Though the site was located using Ijo oral traditions, the author admits the possibility that the Agadagbabou of oral traditions maybe different from the one excavated. Using a range of extant economic activities in the Central Niger Delta, the author attempts to interpret the finds at Agadagbabou through a series of inferences. According to him, the pottery on the site (and other ceramic objects including smoking pipes) was most probably manufactured locally. He also infers the presence of other crafts like basketry (and other cane products), cordage and fabric

manufacture from the range of decorations on the pottery of the site. Fish and animal bones recovered from the site are used to infer fishing, hunting and gathering as important economic activities. The presence of palm kernels on the site indicates the exploitation of the oil palm, while the use of short stemmed smoking pipes, the possibility of a wood carving industry for the production of wooden pipe stems, walking sticks, masks and canoes.

On the absence of tangible evidence of agriculture in the archaeological record here, the author argues that plants which could have possibly been cultivated here are roots crops, none of which survived in the archaeological record. The presence of glass beads here is taken as evidence of external contact and trade even though there is no evidence of cowries nor of manilas which could have been the medium of exchange. On the whole, the author considers Agadagbabou as a relatively permanent habitation site at which both men and women interacted in social and economic activities in similar ways as in extant Ijo communities in the Central Niger Delta.

Chapter Four, discusses the author's investigation of the site of Koroama ($5^{\circ} 02'N$, $6^{\circ} 18'E$). According to him, Koroama was chosen on the basis of oral traditions and reconnaissance which identified the site as a prominent pottery manufacturing centre in the Central Niger Delta. Two mounds (A and B) were identified and excavated. Two test pits were sunk on each mound. Finds include 25,400 pot sherds on mound A alone, gun flints, metal hoe, locally made smoking pipes, fish hooks, European made pipe peaces, fragments of J.J. W Peters gin bottles and food debris including snail shells, fish and animal bones as well as palm nuts. The excavation of Koroama shows five layers of cultural deposits interspersed with layers of natural deposits. The author dates the site using European pipes and flint musket parts recovered from mound B "to not later than the 16th Century AD." This relative date is supported by a radio carbon

determination of “modern” for two samples from mound A. The author completes the chapter by arguing for similarities between both Koroama and Agadagbabou in the areas of pottery (predominance of pots and incision as a decorative motif), subsistence, stratigraphy and material culture.

Chapter Five discusses the author’s investigation of Isomobou (40° 55'N, 60° 10'E) on the south bank of Torukutu Creek. Five test pits were sunk by the author here. Finds, all of which were locally made, included pottery, an iron object, animal and fish bones. Hearths were an important feature of some of the test pits. Charcoal was also a significant find from which five samples were dated by C14. The earliest of these has a calibrated range of AD 1030-1290 indicating evidence of Ijo occupation of the Central Niger Delta from as early the 11 century AD.

In the sixth chapter, the author attempts to interpret the archaeological data from the three sites and articulate a relationship between the Central and the Eastern Niger Delta. An analysis of the material remains including pottery, smoking pipes, metal objects and food remains from the three sites is done after which the non material aspects of Ijo culture are discussed. While the recovery of Kara from Agadagbabou explains the author’s discussion of female circumcision and marriage, his discussion of Ijo mortuary practices is predicated on the absence of burials in the sites excavated here. Taking the Kolokuma of the Central Niger Delta as an ethnographic case study, the author attempts a classification of corpses, followed by a process of interrogating the dead, their burial, coffin types and the different cemetery types amongst extant Ijo groups. According to the author, the Ijo culture of death, including treatment of the corpse and final interment is dependent on age, type and circumstance of death.

On the relationship between the Central and the Eastern Niger Delta, the author underscores the difference between the two environments. While the Central Delta is characterized by fresh water swamps, the Eastern Delta is characterized by salt water and mangrove vegetation. This difference is significant because the Central unlike the Eastern Delta supports both fishing and agriculture. Other areas of contrast (similarity) including language, diet, dress, music, settlement pattern, religion and vernacular architecture are also identified. Drawing on the works of Anozie (1987) and Nzewunwa (1979 and 1987) on the sites of Onyoma, Ke, Ogoloma, Saikiripogu and Okichiri, the author attempts an archaeological portrait of the Eastern Niger Delta and makes broad comparisons between sites there and those of the Central Niger Delta. In both areas of the Delta, locally manufactured smoking pipes predate the arrival of European manufactured pipes. The author uses this fact to make the point that the leaves of the ogboin tree could have been smoked here prior to the arrival of tobacco.

Pottery is the dominant find in both areas of the Delta though; the absence of a uniform analytical framework (according to the author) makes it difficult to argue similarities and peculiarities from the potting traditions across sites of the two areas. Unlike the Central Delta, manilas, cowries shells, brass wares, copper wares, ivory ornaments, salt water shells, terracotta figurines, crucibles, tyres, iron slag and human remains appear in the archaeological record of the Eastern Delta. The author argues that this could have been because of the “relative isolation” of the archaeological sites of the Central Delta. Drawing on evidence from palynology, linguistics and archaeology, the author makes a strong case for multi-dispersal centers from where the Ijo spread to other parts of the Delta.

Chapter seven, the concluding chapter, presents a recap of the archaeology of the Central Niger Delta. The recap is followed by major conclusions and suggested directions for future

archaeological research in the region. The author asserts that the chronological framework erected from the smoking pipes, flint gun, and radio carbon dates indicates an occupation sequence going back to 1030 AD. While the earliest of the three sites investigated here, Isomabou, was abandoned about 15th century AD, Agadagbabou, was not abandoned until after the early 18th century, and Koroama, which was established in the last four hundred years, is still extant. Some of the author's general conclusions regarding the archaeology of the Central Niger Delta from these three sites include the following:

- i. Palynological analysis by Sowunmi (1981) suggests the possibility of agriculture (and by implication, human occupation) in the Central Niger Delta by 800 B.C.
- ii. Linguistic evidence by Kay Williamson (1989) indicates a separation of Ijo language from Yoruba and Ibo as far back as 7,000 years ago.
- iii. There exists a meeting point between oral traditions of the Ijo and the archaeology of the Central Niger Delta.
- iv. Imported goods found on some sites (especially Koroama) indicate external contact through trade.
- v. The Isomabou site on the strength of its early date and nature of its finds, provides evidence that links the Central and Eastern Niger Delta.
- vi. The consistent absence of manilas and burials in the three sites (Agadagbabou, Isomabou and Koroama), though significant is understandable given the nature of these sites (in the case of manilas) and the extant Ijo practice of burying the dead away from the settlement(in the case of burials).

Following these general conclusions, the author asserts that his expectations of the work as set out in his major objectives have been generally met.

On new directions for future research in the Delta area, the author recommends the following strategies:

- a. An investigation of prehistoric developments on the northern fringes of the Delta.
- b. A more comprehensive identification and mapping of archaeological sites in the Eastern and Central Niger Delta.

- c. Increased multi-disciplinary approach to the archaeological study of the Delta area.
- d. A more thorough exploration of the Eastern and Central Niger Delta to identify possible primary (and secondary) dispersal point as suggested in oral traditions of the Ijo.
- e. Use of experimental archaeology to enhance understanding of the different processes of site formation and destruction in the Delta.
- f. Use of ethno-archaeological studies to help our understanding of the archaeological evidence here.
- g. Increased use of rescue archaeology in the Delta given the exploitation of the area for crude oil and gas.

Professor Derefaka's book is a major contribution to Nigerian Archaeology. Though it focuses on the sites of Agadagbabou, Isomabou, and Koroama in the Central Niger Delta, it also gives a very clear and concise archaeological portrait of archaeological work in the whole of the Niger Delta. The book foregrounds a context for understanding the intricate interface between archaeology and oral traditions of the Ijo of the Niger Delta. It is a direct response to the challenge by historians working in the Niger Delta area led by E. J. Alagoa for more concerted collaboration with archaeologists and other specialists. In taking up the challenge, Professor Derefaka has not only been able to demonstrate a meeting point between archaeology and oral traditions in the Niger Delta, he has also demonstrated the potential that exists in the use of linguistics and palynology in the archaeological study of the Delta area.

The series of radiometric dates in the book have enabled Professor Derefaka to develop a chronological sequence for the Central Niger Delta and relate same to the Eastern Niger Delta. Though certain details of these relationships are still not very clear, the connection on its own is an important contribution in understanding movement and contact in the sub region. Professor Derefaka's book has also thrown light on subsistence issues including technology and trade in

the Central Niger Delta. Even though, some of these issues find expression in traditions, archaeology has tended to clarify them and underscore their significance in the development of settlements in the Central Delta. The generous use of appendixes by the author is also quite helpful in clarifying issues relating to analysis of finds and local knowledge relating to the culture of death and plant use amongst the Ijo of the Central Niger Delta. *Archaeology and Culture History in the Central Niger Delta* is a commendable attempt by the author to disseminate results of his PhD work to a wider audience. It represents years of strenuous fieldwork in a very difficult and turbulent terrain under very excruciating conditions. It is a very useful addition to the body of literature on Nigerian archaeology by a leading Nigerian archaeologist. Professor Derefaka has demonstrated that even with little resources it is possible to do thorough archaeological work with commendable procedural integrity.

While highly commending this book to the body of archaeologists interested in the Nigerian and African field, it is important to comment briefly on a few flaws which this reviewer noticed in the book. The first of this has to do with the author's use of certain concepts. Considering his focus on and acceptance of oral traditions as a central historiographic system in the archaeological study of the Central Niger Delta, his use of historical archaeology and prehistory in the book is rather confusing. His agreement (see page 233) with Hume (1995) and Schuyler (1972) on their distinction between prehistoric archaeology and historical archaeology is confusing when on the very next page (page 234) he also agrees with Schmidt's conceptualization of historical archaeology. This confusion is all the more when the author discusses Koroama as a historic site as opposed to Agadagbabou and Isomobou, because of the preponderance of Koroama's imported European goods.

Insofar as the author accepts the use of oral traditions as a valid historiographic system and has been able to demonstrate a meeting point between Ijo traditions and the sites of Agadagbabou and Isomabou, it is not clear how these sites are less historic than Koroama. Elsewhere, Echo-Hawk (2002) while exploring aspects of the history of Caddoan America, suggests the use of “ancient history” in place of “prehistory.” The continued use of the term prehistory, according to him, presumes the absence of written records and suggests that oral traditions preserve something other than history and or have no information relevant to the period described as prehistoric.

African archaeologists whose work underscores the significance of the corroborative use of archaeology and oral traditions in the study of the past must begin to rethink the usefulness of the terms “prehistory” and “history” as primary taxonomic tools in African historiography. One also expected a greater integration of oral traditions with the author’s field observations in the Central Niger Delta. The author admits for example that the Agadagbabou site excavated “is not likely to be the exact location for the Agadagbabou referred to in the oral traditions.” Since the author had recognized this from the onset, it would have been more helpful to search and locate the Agadagbabou of traditions rather than settle for a location pinpointed by a guide, especially when the location turned out to be a piece of land belonging to the guide’s family? Further research in the Niger Delta must involve field initiatives aimed at identifying problems relating to oral traditions of individual sites and features. In place where this has been done (see Wickler 2002), it has been easier to explore the complexities of the cultural landscape and articulate the social context of archaeological remains.

The low quality of the plates in the book significantly affected the overall quality of the book. There are all together, a total of 15 plates in the book all of which are very blurred. Some

of the maps (figures) are also not very clear. The general editing of the book could also have been significantly improved. A few references like Talbot (1926 and 1932), Gbaranbiri (1976), Hamsford (1976), Thomas (1910), Greenberg (1963 and 1969), Williamson (1972 and 1982) and Asseez (1976), cited in the body of the work, are not detailed in the bibliography. There is also a mix up in the pagination of some of the illustrations. For example, Fig 4.6 supposed to be on page 138 appears on page 139, while Fig 4.7 supposed to be on page 139 appears on page 138. Reference to Appendix D on page 197 (while discussing the crops cultivated in the Central Niger Delta) is most probably to Appendix B since Appendix D is on the interrogation and examination of the dead amongst the Kolokuma Izon. A few spellings are also mixed up and not standardized. For example, the reader does not know whether we are dealing with manilas or manillas since both spellings are used interchangeable in the book.

The author would also have considerably enriched the book if while discussing the Ijo culture of death, he had also clarified aspects of the disposal facility (grave) dealing in greater detail with size, depth and burial orientation. From an archaeological perspective, such descriptions will help when burials are encountered in the Niger Delta and attempts are made to test the ethnographic model of the culture of death against the archaeological data. Similarly, the prominence given migration in the Niger Delta in the book raises issues which the author has been unable to clarify. One of this is the extent to which we can distinguish between changes produced in the archaeological record as a result of migration as opposed to those produced from other forms of cultural transfer especially trade and diffusion. Given the fact that the Niger Delta is multi-cultural and the Ijo are just one of the many other groups who have had a long history of settlement in the Delta, it would have been very helpful if the author had explored the theoretical and methodological challenges of linking archaeological data with particular ethnic

groups here as a basis for understanding not only the process of migration (through time) in the Delta but also the extent to which such process is susceptible to archaeological study.

Burmeister (2000) has demonstrated that theoretical and methodological approaches exist to an archaeological proof of migration and archaeologists interested in migration as a phenomenon must not only begin to work towards establishing proof of the phenomenon in their study areas but begin to explore migration as an element of cultural behavior.

Considering the indiscriminate degradation of the environment (and cultural resources) in the Niger Delta due to oil exploration, one expected that Professor Deafaka while on his closing remarks and suggestions of future directions in the archaeology of the Niger Delta would comment on emerging ethical issues in the interface between archaeology and development in the Delta. The Niger Delta is the world's largest wetland comprising 14,000 square miles of marshland, creeks, tributaries and lagoons draining into the Atlantic Ocean at the Bight of Biafra (Ibeanu, 2000). It accounts for more than 90% of Nigeria's crude oil production. Multi-nationals working in the Delta have minimal regard for the environment and cultural resources of the Delta. Gas flaring is at an all time high releasing huge amounts of greenhouse gases into atmosphere adversely affecting plants, wildlife and humans. Indiscriminate spillage from high pressure pipelines and other installations affect both plant and animal life and affects aquifers in the Delta. While this destruction is a major cause of instability in the area, it underscores the need for the archaeological community in Nigeria to begin to engage both the public, government and the multi-national corporations to help ensure a more responsible stewardship of the environment and cultural resources of the Delta. Cultural resources impact studies are needed to precede on shore oil exploration activities. There is also the need to closely monitor these activities by professional archaeologists.

This book is quite informative and is a must-read for students of Nigerian archaeology interested in the Niger Delta. It is also strongly recommended for the archaeological community in other parts of the world, especially those in the New World, where there is a robust interface between oral traditions (of Native Americans) and archaeology. Archaeologists in the New World especially those interested in the corroborative use of archaeology and oral traditions will find the book quite insightful and refreshing. In Nigeria and much of Africa, the heightened significance of oral traditions in archaeological investigations is impacting both theory and field methods. In as much as this is also happening in the New World, Professor Derefaka's book has a comparative value which can benefit and enrich the discourse on the corroborative use of oral traditions and archaeology. Themes and issues raised in the book including migrations and contact with Europeans are also similar to reoccurring themes and issues in the archaeology of the New World. This means that archaeologists from both sides of the divide can engage each other fruitfully on issues of theory and method around these issues and even consider the possibility of joint archaeological initiatives which will not only reinforce research on both sides but also enrich perspectives.

On the whole, the book's strong points far outweigh the few lapses pointed out above. One is sure that when the author gets the opportunity to produce a newer version, attention will be paid to some of the editorial flaws highlighted above. That way, readers may have a more qualitative volume.

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